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Book Review

Gordon Brown and Terry Copp, *Look to Your Front...Regina Rifles: A Regiment at War, 1944-45* (Waterloo, Ontario: Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies, Wilfrid Laurier University, 2001).

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Look to Your Front is the product of an unique alliance between an Albertan World War II veteran and an academic from Ontario. The project came about when Terry Copp, the well-known chronicler of Canadian efforts during WWII and editor of *Canadian Military History*, approached Gordon Brown, formerly of the Regina Rifles, to compile his and others' recollections of the regiment's activities throughout the last year of the war into a book-length history. Already the well-published author of *CMH* articles on the action at Moyland Wood and the Abbaye d'Ordenne, here Brown supplies several individual perspectives on the events of 1944 and 1945 while Copp provides chapter introductions that establish the wider historical context for the Rifles' time overseas, and more specifically that regiment's first battalion, the Regina Johnns. Copp and Brown begin with the preparations that saw the regiment leave Regina for Canada's east coast and then embark for England, where it trained and prepared for the landings in France. On 6 June 1944, the regiment hit Juno Beach alongside the Royal Winnipeg Rifles and then preceded to come face to face with Kurt Meyer and the 12th SS at Bretteville, where the Regina regiment not only held the town but inflicted severe losses in tanks and personnel on Meyer's formation. Deserving of rest, the Reginas were put into reserve in the village of Bray until it was time to participate in Operation Charnwood, a massive assault on the city of Caen. Casualties there exceeded those of D-Day but the Rifles captured their objective and were fortunately not forced to withstand a counter-attack from the 12th SS. The move from Caen to Falaise is the topic of the sixth chapter, while the seventh is concerned with the pursuit to Calais in late August 1944. The ultimately successful but costly struggle for Leopold Canal is discussed next, the Canadians in action there vastly outnumbered and at a critical tactical disadvantage. From there the Regina Rifles saw action at Moyland Wood near the Rhine River, where they took such heavy losses that the regiment had to be withdrawn and rebuilt, even though it was clear that the Germans would be unable to wage war much longer. With the enemy on the run on the east side of the Rhine River, the battle weary Reginas joined the chase and were active right up to May 5th and the end of the war. Finally, *Look to Your Front* takes the troops home and describes how their contributions have been commemorated. The book is completed by an especially interesting and useful series of appendices which include biographies of some of those in the Johnns, the names of those on the Honour Roll and that received award citations, and the tragically long list of men killed between D-Day and VE-Day.

This regimental history is successful in several different ways. Firstly and probably most importantly, it addresses the crucial need to collect and publish veterans' stories. First-person accounts are in finite supply and this book contains many which are beautifully written and describe the full scope of the Regina Johnns' experience overseas, including those events and situations that occurred off the battlefield. Secondly, the production of the book is the result of a partnership between military historians of both academic and veteran backgrounds, each perspective informing the other for a balanced narrative. Lastly, the book includes rare photographs, military documents and other primary sources that, in the great tradition of material history, enhance our understanding of and empathy with the

people whose lives were irrevocably altered by their contact with the Regina Johns. The effort to include all these helpful facets dictated the scrapbook style of *Look to Your Front*. This book is only one of several scrapbook-type publications introduced in the last couple of years, but it avoids the pitfalls that such works usually suffer from such as the compromise of solid information to accommodate pictorial representations. Terry Copp overcame this challenge first in *No Price Too High*, which attempted to break down the complexity of wartime Canada into easily digestible vignettes. Here he and Brown exceed the quality of other military history books with similar formats, like those recently published by the Robin Brass Studio in Toronto, specifically George Beal's *Family of Volunteers: An Illustrated History of the 48th Highlanders of Canada* (2001), which makes a concerted effort not to mention any members of the regiment by name, and Hugh Halliday's *Not in the Face of the Enemy: Canadians Awarded the Air Force Cross and Air Force Medal, 1918-1966* (2000), which focuses on the achievements of award-winning air force personnel and has very little to offer in the way of the wider historical context.

The only drawback of the book revolves around its poor copy editing. Typos, inconsistent punctuation, abrupt endings to certain sections and confused borrowing from previous interviews and publications diminishes the book's polished and professional appearance, and is at times a real irritation to the reader. In addition, part way through the book, Copp's introductions to the work's different sections disappear and are replaced by first-person comments that are not as effective in supplying contextual information and interrupt the pattern the reader has come to expect.

Look to Your Front reminds us that the victory of World War II was made possible by individuals working in concert within military formations. Regimental histories contribute something completely essential to the Canadian military history canon by occupying the middle ground between survey/theme works that decipher the overall Canadian contribution in one or more areas while obscuring all but the most politically powerful or visible people, and memoirs which are founded on moving personal revelations of war time, but generally bereft of historical context. The genre of regimental history is the best means of chronicling both war and personal front-line experiences and *Look to Your Front* is a fine example of the species.

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